

News Release



U.S. Department of Labor
Office of Public Affairs
Philadelphia, Pa.
Release Number: 10-31-PHI

For Immediate Release
Jan. 14, 2010
Contact: Diana Petterson Amy Louviere
Phone: 202-693-1898 202-693-9423

MSHA releases report, issues violations in West Virginia mine inundation *Flooding from heavy rains led to 24-hour underground entrapment of 7 miners*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) has issued its accident investigation report in the May 2009 inundation that left seven coal miners trapped underground for nearly 24 hours at the Cobra Resources LLC Mountaineer Alma A Mine in Wharncliffe, W.Va.

On May 9, heavy rains in and around southern West Virginia touched off a series of events that caused an inundation of water to enter the mine’s portals and accumulate in a low area. Storm runoff water entered the mine portals after being diverted when culverts underneath the portals became blocked by debris, mud and rock. Trees and other vegetation in the uppermost ditch created a bottleneck, along with a buildup of sediment that prevented the ditches from functioning as designed.

The accumulated pool of water underground blocked the escape routes of seven miners working underground. They became trapped for nearly 24 hours until the water was pumped down. Ultimately, all seven exited from the mine without injury.

“These miners had the wherewithal to move to higher ground,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Their actions, along with the expertise of federal and state mining officials and mine management, resulted in a positive outcome. Nevertheless, the mine operator’s failure to properly maintain underground diversion systems and escapeways could just as easily have ended in tragedy.

“This accident underscores the need for mine operators to always maintain escapeways so they are available for use by miners when they need them,” he added.

MSHA issued two citations to the mine operator. In the first violation, the mine operator did not regularly monitor and properly maintain the mine’s system of diversion ditches, designed to route storm runoff surface water away from the mine portals and into ponds constructed to handle runoff. Consequently, the operator failed to adequately protect the surface openings at the main portal areas to prevent flood water from entering the mine, in that flood waters from the surface entered the mine and inundated the escapeways, making those escapeways impassable.

The second violation was issued for the operator’s failure to maintain the two separate and distinct escapeways in safe condition. The flood waters entered the mine and inundated a low area at the main portal in all 10 entries, preventing the seven miners from exiting the mine. The depth of the water ranged from 0 feet to approximately 9 feet deep and was roofed in most areas.

###

U.S. Department of Labor releases are accessible on the Internet at <http://www.dol.gov>. The information in this news release will be made available in alternate format (large print, Braille, audio tape or disc) from the COAST office upon request. Please specify which news release when placing your request at 202-693-7828 or TTY 202-693-7755. The Labor Department is committed to providing America’s employers and employees with easy access to understandable information on how to comply with its laws and regulations. For more information, please visit <http://www.dol.gov/compliance>.